

Bridging the Policy Gap: A Critical Autoethnography of Asylum Accompaniment

Amanda Heffernan  and Audrey Hudgins 

Seattle University

Executive Summary

Unlike refugees, most asylum-seekers receive scant attention from US government and non-profit agencies. A loose network of individuals and organizations aims to bridge this gap in policy and services through the practice of asylum accompaniment. This article, by two scholar-activists with a combined 10 years of experience accompanying asylum-seekers, aims to:

- Explore the praxis of asylum accompaniment via critical autoethnography, using our accompaniment narratives to illuminate the dynamics of accompaniment relationships, including the profound mutual benefits of this type of engagement and the complexities of social and political power, privilege, and access
- Propose policy solutions that emerge from critical reflection on our experiences, including increased support for accompaniment networks
- Offer a practical tool, *The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment*, as a resource for informed accompaniment of asylum-seekers

Keywords

migration, asylum, accompaniment, hosting, sponsorship, critical autoethnography

Introduction

Asylum is under assault (Schneid 2024; White House 2024). People exercising their internationally recognized right to seek protection confront a border increasingly fortified against them, physically and bureaucratically. Despite the accelerated hardening of the United States-Mexico border, it is far from the last barrier an asylum-seeker faces, as a profound set of new challenges await them in the United States (US). While an infrastructure of policies, programs, and services exists to support refugee integration (Whitman et al. 2022), asylum-seekers receive scant attention and are typically left to navigate the path to integration on their own. Networks of individuals and non-profit organizations committed to migrant accompaniment — varying in size, level of institutional support, and political orientation — work in this liminal space to bridge the gap.

It is in this context that we, as two academic migrant justice advocates, decided to explore our personal experiences with asylum accompaniment via critical autoethnography. Our involvement spans a combined ten years of asylum accompaniment with three asylum-seekers, across two US presidential administrations. As Boylorn and Orbe (2022, 8) note, critical autoethnography can be “a means to enhance existing understandings of lived experiences enacted within social locations situated within larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege.” In that spirit, we will situate ourselves within our narratives, exploring the multi-layered dynamics of social and political power and privilege that underly and affect

Corresponding Author:

Amanda Heffernan, Seattle University, 901 12th Avenue,
Seattle, WA 98122-1090, USA.
Email: aheffernan@seattleu.edu

accompaniment relationships. We seek to understand, but also to act; as Holman Jones (2016, 232) notes, what makes an autoethnography “critical” is “the commitment to linking analysis and action as they unfold together in a material and ethical practice”. Grounded in critical reflection of our accompaniment narratives, we propose that accompaniment can be strengthened by embedding accompaniment relationships in robust support networks. Finally, we seek to welcome others into this complex yet rewarding praxis with practical wisdom gleaned from our experiences, in the form of a guide called *The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment*.

Vignette I. Meet Joanna, Alexy, and Lety.

Throughout this article, we will share narratives from our accompaniment experiences, walking alongside those who have invited us into their lives: Joanna, Alexy, and Lety.¹ Audrey first accompanied Joanna, and later Alexy. Joanna, a young Venezuelan woman, lived with Audrey for a year and is now thriving in her own place, with a community of friends, and a well-paying job that enables her to support her family in Venezuela. Alexy, a young Russian man, lives with Audrey as he saves money for his own place, takes English classes, and awaits his next asylum hearing. Amanda accompanies Lety, a young Honduran mother of two who was recently granted asylum on appeal after a five-year wait.

Background

Refugees Versus Asylum-Seekers: The Impact of Legal Status

While the difference between *asylum-seeker* and *refugee* might not be immediately obvious, the impact of the differences between these distinct legal categories is difficult to overstate. Refugees are officially admitted to the US by a State Department program after demonstrating that they “were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS] 2022). While the early twentieth century was marked by a reluctance to admit refugees to the

US, openness to refugees increased during the post World War II economic boom. The Refugee Act of 1980 created a comprehensive refugee policy for the first time, formally establishing the US government’s role in providing refugees resources and support for successful community integration through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR 2020; Wasem 2020). The number of refugees admitted to the US has ranged from highs over 200,000 in the early 1980s — when Congress provided for the admission of refugees from mostly communist countries — to a nadir of 15,000 under the Trump administration in 2020. In 2022, 25,465 refugees were admitted (Migration Policy Institute 2023). Currently, ten government-funded non-profit resettlement agencies provide transition assistance to refugees, including housing, financial assistance, medical insurance, employment, and educational assistance, including language classes (Kobucista, McBride, and Roy 2023). Private sponsorship remains an important source of support for refugees (Bier and La Corte 2016), a reality only recently acknowledged by the government through the establishment of the Welcome Corps program (Welcome Corps 2024).

Like refugees, people seeking asylum in the US must also show that they were persecuted or possess a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (USCIS 2022). In contrast to refugees, however, asylum-seekers must make it into the US on their own, entering the country via authorized or unauthorized means, including crossing the southern border (USCIS 2023). They must apply for asylum within one year of entering the country and most are not entitled to any support during the process,² except for Haitians and Cubans, who Congress made eligible for refugee services for political reasons (USCIS 2024). Incredibly, there are more than two million asylum-seekers waiting for their day in court (TRAC 2022; Kerwin and Kerwin 2024). Asylum cases

¹ Joanna, Alexy, and Lety are pseudonyms.

² Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum come under the custody of the ORR, which runs a network of shelters and coordinates the placement of minors with family members or foster families (ORR 2024). While they are an important population worthy of special attention, this article’s focus is on asylum-seeking adults.

currently take an average of 4.2 years (Esterline and Batalova 2022; Batalova and Ward 2023), with around 70 percent of cases denied (TRAC 2022). Asylum categories and eligibility requirements are vestiges of Cold War-era policymaking that do not adequately represent today's protection needs. Successive presidential administrations also change the guidance for immigration judges, as when the Trump administration disallowed asylum claims relating to gender-based violence (Anker 2020). Some migrants, such as climate refugees, have experienced significant trauma in their home countries and during the migration process but do not currently qualify for asylum (Atapattu 2020). Others might qualify for asylum and not know it.

Asylum-seekers, then, represent a highly marginalized group of people, often traumatized and frequently impoverished (Valdez et al. 2015), living under a cloud of legal uncertainty and fear of deportation, a precarious state social scientists have called *deportability* (De Genova 2002). At the often-disorienting moment of being released from detention, several non-profits near the border provide transitional shelter, medical care, and travel coordination, but this support ends when they leave. Some asylum-seekers leaving shelter or detention are received by a host or a sponsor. For them, the start of the sponsorship or hosting arrangement is just the beginning of a long and often arduous journey toward self-sufficiency. Some start the process of integration into US society in even more precarious circumstances, with nowhere to stay (Patrick 2024). The lack of government assistance for asylum-seekers with pending cases is a lacuna that a loosely organized network of local and national non-profit agencies, activist groups, religious organizations, and individuals attempt to fill with the practice of *accompaniment*, the focus of this article.

What Is Accompaniment? Migrant accompaniment is the process of *accompanying* a migrating person through their daily life in the country of their arrival. People providing accompaniment are diverse, with a variety of underlying motivations, goals, and degrees of involvement in formal and informal accompaniment networks. A sampling of definitions of accompaniment provides insight into the

diversity of philosophies and motivations underlying this work in the US. One definition, from the Church Council of Greater Seattle (2023) states:

Accompaniment is the practice of walking with one another side-by-side through challenges, moments of uncertainty, and fear. In this way we seek to provide moments of relief that there is a community here to alleviate the burden of navigating fearsome and unknown systems alone by acting as a support system and serving as a community. (para 1.)

This definition focuses on accompaniment as a *humanitarian action*, motivated by a desire to alleviate suffering. The idea of walking side-by-side is a common one, but risks eliding the power dynamics inherent in a relationship between a person or family with citizenship and the asylum-seekers they accompany.

Another definition, from the Jesuit Refugee Service USA's (2024) Migrant Accompaniment Network (MAN) states that those providing accompaniment:

...will be a human connection for recently arrived refugees and asylum-seeking families to guide them to local services and resources that can meet their housing, employment, legal, medical, pastoral care, and other needs. The goals of [people providing accompaniment] are to accompany individuals, help create community and achieve a sense of stability for newcomers, assist in meeting their more pressing needs, and facilitate friendship and support. We are hoping that welcoming communities become better informed and more open to see the testimony of faith and hope, as well as the positive contributions that arriving individuals can make to their new place of residence.

This definition elaborates on the kinds of *practical assistance* with daily living and navigating the transition to a new country that accompaniment often entails. It builds on faith-based motivations for accompaniment (Kerwin 2024) and touches on the idea of accompaniment as political education. The MAN's hope that accompaniment practices will help communities become better informed about migration and more welcoming of migrants reflects Churrua-Muguruza's (2022) conceptualization of migrant accompaniment as a form of "everyday humanitarian

diplomacy” whose aims include “advancing migrants’ rights, seeking to make helpful, empowering and transformational interventions in an attempt to resist and change the contemporary global governance of migration” (p. 1).

A third definition, from the legal empowerment network Justice Power (2020), makes the political much more explicit:

Accompaniment programs promote the rights and dignity of immigrants and challenge power dynamics in immigration decision-making spaces. They provide emotional and physical solidarity to those navigating the system, and signal to the government that immigrant allies are watching. Volunteers regularly accompany immigrants or their family members to immigration court, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) check-ins, civil and criminal court, as well as to schools, hospitals, and other places. Accompaniments provide a space for volunteers and family members to journey alongside immigrants as they navigate a complicated, often terrorizing system.

This definition reflects a practice of accompaniment as *contention* (Bussoli and Lucciano 2024) against an unjust border regime. One form of contention is the act of *witnessing*. Witnessing impacts the person providing accompaniment (as a form of political education or Freirean *conscientization* (Freire 2000)), the person being accompanied (who receives support navigating hostile systems), and the system itself, which is put on notice by the presence of politicized witnesses. Yarris (2021), for example, describes accompanying migrants to ICE check-ins and immigration court hearings in Oregon as an engaged ethnographer and a community volunteer with a migrant justice organization. Accompaniment allowed her to witness firsthand how “routine, bureaucratic encounters (re) produce illegality and exclusion by enacting violence against migrants through the powers of surveillance and administrative monitoring, and the threat of deportation and family separation” (ibid., 214).

We, like Yarris (2021), embody the identities of academic researcher, community activist, and practitioner of migrant accompaniment. We are motivated to walk with migrating people out of simple compassion, but also out of a sense of duty to mitigate the harms of the US’s unjust immigration enforcement system. We each have been humbled by what we

have learned in accompaniment, as we have gone through our own processes of political education and conscientization grounded in day-to-day experiences shared with the people we have accompanied. Our definition of accompaniment includes elements of each definition above: walking with migrants with kindness and compassion, assisting them in navigating the systems that affect their lives, and participating in collective action to reform and mitigate the harms of the US border regime.

Methods

This article grew out of a conversations we had while co-leading a migrant justice immersion course for undergraduate students in the US-Mexico borderlands. As we compared our research interests, political commitments, and life experiences, we realized how profoundly we had both been impacted by long-term individual relationships with asylum-seekers. Though Amanda had been accompanying Lety for three years by the time she met Audrey, it was Audrey who gave Amanda the concept of *accompaniment* with which to understand and name the relationship. As we shared sometimes painful moments of personal and political growth, we decided that accompaniment was worth exploring more deeply. We chose critical autoethnography as the method to interrogate our accompaniment experiences and link them to our broader understandings of social and political power.

Jones’ (2018) three key goals of critical autoethnography, as described by Boylorn and Orbe (2022) are to:

- (1) to examine systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others;
- (2) to mobilize and develop the explanatory frameworks that critical theory provides us — by putting theory into action through storytelling; and (3) to build new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices. (6)

We worked toward these goals by sharing our asylum accompaniment narratives with each other, engaging in reflective writing and analysis, and seeking feedback from trusted colleagues, academics, and people working in migrant-serving organizations. As we wrote, read, and reflected on each other’s experiences,

we realized that part of our praxis was not only to engage in asylum accompaniment ourselves, but to welcome others into it — “stimulat[ing] new practices” as Boylorn and Orbe (2022, 6) note above. In the following sections we will share our asylum accompaniment narratives and the themes that emerged from them, discuss policy recommendations, and share the *The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment*, a practical tool for offering welcoming and honest guidance to people new to asylum accompaniment.

Findings: Accompaniment Narratives and Emerging Themes

Getting Started: What Will This Mean?

Each of us was first asked to accompany someone seeking asylum by a contact we knew from previous migrant justice advocacy or volunteer work. Audrey had been volunteering at Kino Border Initiative, a Catholic migrant services organization in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, and Amanda had participated in migrant justice organizing in Tucson, Arizona. On the threshold of accompaniment, we were committed and engaged politically and materially but had not yet taken on the intimate, personal work of individual accompaniment.

Vignette 2. Making a House a Home.

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, I (Audrey) received an email from Kino Border Initiative that would transform my life and Joanna's. From detention, Joanna had fought her asylum case pro se (without a lawyer) and had been granted Withholding of Removal, a form of protection under US law for those who fear persecution in their home country. She could not be released into the US from detention without a fixed address and her undocumented cousin, who had previously agreed to serve as her host, reneged on her promise due to her fear of deportation by ICE. I answered Kino's call and a few weeks later greeted Joanna at the airport. While I had little working knowledge of asylum accompaniment, I felt called to accompany a fellow human being by welcoming Joanna into my home and supporting her transition to a new community. Over the next year, we got to know each other well as we navigated the language barrier, the complex bureaucracy of government and non-profit services and support, and the path toward self-sufficiency.

Vignette 3. To Host or Not to Host.

In the spring of 2019, I (Amanda) was living in Tucson with my husband and 3-year-old and was pregnant with my second child. An activist friend told me about Lety, who was living in Texas with her partner and 4-month-old baby. Could we host her for a few weeks while she worked with her lawyer to prepare for her asylum hearing in Tucson? Like many people who had helplessly watched the horror of the family separations of the summer of 2018, I was looking for something concrete I could do. This was an opportunity to live our values, to be hospitable, and to mitigate the effects of immigration policies we did not believe in. We also had our doubts. How would hosting Lety and her baby affect our 3-year-old? Would we come to resent having to share our space? Would we have the cognitive energy to speak Spanish with our guest after a long day at work? In the end, we said yes. We prepared our guest room and gave Lety a virtual tour via WhatsApp. The night before she was to arrive, I learned that Lety had found a more familiar place to stay — a room at the shelter that housed her when she was first released from ICE detention the year before. I felt both relieved and disappointed. Though I never hosted Lety, I became a part of her support team from then on, an accompaniment relationship that has now lasted four years.

Audrey, then, began her accompaniment journey as both a sponsor and a host, while Amanda's relationship with Lety was less formally defined. For asylum-seekers and those who accompany them, the distinction between sponsorship and hosting is an important one. Sponsorship is a formal process in which US citizens or legal permanent residents submit paperwork to ICE that attests to their capacity to comply with requirements including a fixed residential address at which to receive mail concerning court dates and legal proceedings; the ability to provide a safe, comfortable place to sleep; and the financial means to provide such as food, transportation, clothing, etc. (Asylum-seekers Sponsorship Project n.d.). For detained asylum-seekers, securing sponsorship is a requirement for release. Most often, the sponsor knows the asylum-seeker or has been matched with them through an organization, as Audrey was with Joanna. No government agency monitors the well-being of asylum-seekers after they are released to

their sponsor; sometimes these relationships turn out to be exploitative or offer very limited support (Associated Press 2023). Hosting, in contrast, can be an informal process. Typically, asylum-seekers have a friend or family member with whom they intend to stay or are connected through an organization. Whether the host is an official sponsor or not, living together is a complex undertaking that can be filled with joy, companionship, opportunities for language learning, and growing intercultural understanding. It can also be marked by complexity, conflict, and difficulty setting boundaries — and sometimes all of the above!

Vignette 4. Breaking Bread Together.

Joanna and I (Audrey) had been sharing space for about two weeks when we finally had time to visit a Latin American grocery store. There, we found the special flour Joanna needed to make arepas, a delicious Venezuelan cornmeal cake. Our shopping adventure that day transformed into a shared culinary journey. Each week, we alternated chef duties, introducing our favorite dishes to each other while the other served as a sous chef and cleaner of the *desastre en la cocina* (kitchen disaster).

With no official government instruction manual³ to follow, hosts and asylum-seekers have varying degrees of knowledge about the asylum process and the limited social services and support to which an asylum-seeker may be entitled. In some states, asylum-seekers can access benefits such as cash or food assistance, medical assistance, employment preparation, job placement, and English language training. Some agencies, such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC 2024) can provide legal services, case management, mental health, medical evaluations, and other services to asylum-seekers, but these organizations are often overwhelmed and short-staffed. The service and support landscape can be barren and difficult to traverse, making informed accompaniment crucial. For us, accompaniment has

involved gradually expanding our knowledge of community resources, the asylum legal process, the processes of transition and integration, and indeed, ourselves.

Vignette 5. Finding a Lawyer.

Both Alexy and I (Audrey) understood that legal representation would be important to a successful asylum case. Neither of us were lawyers (nor had we played one on TV, as we liked to joke), so we started calling local immigration lawyers and searching for immigrants' rights and other organizations that offered pro bono legal services. Two private law firms offered fee-based initial consultations which helped us gain clarity on the process, but the \$8,000 and \$12,000 price tags were more than we could afford despite many generous offers of support from friends and colleagues. All six non-profit organizations we contacted were not taking new asylum cases. A friend suggested reaching out to the local law schools' immigration clinics. One responded and after two consultations to discuss the nature of the claim, Alexy signed a contract that guaranteed free legal representation and offered lawyers-in-training the opportunity to gain real-world experience under the supervision of a seasoned immigration attorney. We submitted the asylum application in early 2023 and his next hearing is in late 2025.

Complexities of Accompaniment: Trauma, Boundaries, and Power

Engagement in migrant justice activism and/or volunteer work means encounter with the stories and struggles of asylum-seekers and refugees. For some people from high-income, migrant-receiving countries, these experiences may be profound but can be held at something of a distance; privilege makes it easy to come home from an organizing meeting, a protest, or an afternoon volunteering at a shelter, shut the door, and return to our compartmentalized lives. Choosing to engage in accompaniment, especially hosting in one's home, leads to direct and deeply entangled relationships with asylum-seekers. These relationships can be life-altering, causing profound positive personal and political growth, and can also be destabilizing, confusing, and awkward. Accompaniment relationships can shatter assumptions and provoke reflection on issues related to unearned privilege and wealth, power and

³ Several excellent guides are available, including the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's Congregational Accompaniment Project for Asylum Seekers and United Church of Christ's A Toolkit for U.S. Congregations Accompanying Individuals Seeking Asylum.

authority, and structural marginalization (Wilkinson and D'Angelo 2019). Accompaniment relationships can also provoke differences of opinion in families or couples, often regarding boundaries. Accompaniment can fuel the desire to advocate for policy change and migration justice.

Vignette 6. Comida China.

While Lety was in Arizona awaiting her asylum hearing, I took her to appointments with her lawyer, to the store, and on outings that included weekly chats about life over lunch with her favorite food, *comida china* (Chinese food). I learned the harrowing story of her escape from Honduras, and of the frequent headaches and insomnia she experienced due to the head injury and trauma she had suffered. To assuage the anxiety we both felt the day before her hearing, we went to Target. She chose a black pantsuit and heels – a power suit for the ordeal she was about to face. The next day, I had the honor of witnessing Lety's strength and grace as she was forced to recount painful details of her past in response to questions from a hostile DHS lawyer and a willfully obtuse immigration judge. A few days later at a small party before she returned to Texas, Lety thanked *las comadres*, her name for the small confederation of women friends and migrant justice comrades who came together to support her. To this day, the *comadres* share a Signal thread where we confer, strategize, worry and celebrate Lety and her children.

Power, White Saviorism, and Trauma. Some of the awkward feelings that can arise in an accompaniment relationship relate to the acute imbalance of power inherent in a relationship between a person or family with the means to host in a migrant-receiving country, and an asylum-seeker or asylum-seeking family who has been forced to flee their home to start over in a country where they lack citizenship privilege and are likely marginalized in other ways. Asylum-seekers are often socially isolated, especially if they do not speak English well. In addition, most asylum-seekers have experienced significant trauma and may be suffering from mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. These factors combine to make asylum-seekers extremely vulnerable.

Part of the work of accompaniment is learning to recognize this vulnerability and take steps to mitigate the power imbalance. While we cannot change the structural conditions surrounding our relationships, we can take pains to prioritize the dignity and autonomy of those we are accompanying. This may require internal work to undo tendencies toward *white saviorism* (Cole 2012), a paternalistic tendency to think that we know best for others, especially people more marginalized than ourselves. As Bussoli and Lucciano (2024) note, paternalistic or saviorist attitudes risk reproducing border regimes within the accompaniment relationship.

Standpoint epistemology can serve as an important counterpoint to white saviorist tendencies. Standpoint epistemology posits that everyone understands the world from point of view determined by their positionality along axes of privilege and oppression. Those most marginalized have a unique view of the workings of power and privilege, and likely understand those structures better than those with more privilege (Martínez 1996). Boylorn and Orbe (2022, 7) note that critical autoethnography “requires intersectional analyses that account for multiple identities and positionalities that may include disadvantaged and privileged standpoints.” While many scholars who engage in critical autoethnography write from the margins, we recognize that we are writing from the center, from positions of power, access, and privilege as cisgender, white, US-citizen academics. Our positionality creates a moral obligation to contend with systems of domination at multiple scales, from the level of government and institutional policy to their more insidious workings inside ourselves and our relationships.

People offering accompaniment to asylum-seekers must remind themselves that asylum-seekers are the experts in their own lives, needs, and priorities, even as they may need assistance navigating unfamiliar institutions in a new country. The expertise of asylum-seekers and other marginalized people, such as refugees, undocumented migrants, and formerly detained people, is not just individual, but collective, as local migrant-led organizations have experience with building community resilience and resistance in the face of the structural violence of

the immigration enforcement system. Connecting asylum-seekers with local migrant-led community organizations can be an important step toward empowerment, community-building, and accessing collective knowledge that will help with navigating the systems (legal, educational, health, and social services) that impact asylum-seekers' lives.

For those of us who have grown up with race and class privilege, recognizing the lived expertise of asylum-seekers, both individual and collective, can involve a conscious practice of decentering ourselves. Watkins (2021, 101) describes this active, conscious decentering as a form of decolonial ethics that has the potential to foster a "mutual accompaniment." This reorientation enables accompaniment to potentially become a mutual process of co-liberation that can over time transform into committed solidarity for more just relations. Paradoxically, the practice of committed solidarity can involve efforts to both give up or equalize power (in the context of the accompaniment relationship) and to mobilize one's power to for strategic use (while practicing contentious accompaniment or engaging in advocacy). Both authors have experienced this dynamic, calling upon their courage and mobilizing their social and political capital when engaging in migrant justice-related activism and accompaniment-related advocacy.

Vignette 7. Opening a Bank Account.

When I (Audrey) welcomed Joanna into my home, she wore an ankle monitor and had regular ICE check-ins. ICE held all her Venezuelan identity documents and the papers provided by the US government were not official enough to obtain a driver's license or open a bank account, two things she knew she would need when she began working. More importantly, as she described it, she felt "naked" without any form of identification. I had to agree, and it wasn't something I had ever thought about. During her next check-in, she begged the ICE officer to let us "borrow" her passport and 30 minutes later we were on our way to the bank to open an account. She knew what she needed to be successful in her new community and took action to make it a reality.

Alongside connecting asylum-seekers with resources for integration and belonging as outlined in the ABCs (see Appendix), sponsors and hosts should familiarize

themselves with and offer to connect asylum-seekers with culturally congruent mental-health resources. It is important to recognize that the mental-health effects of trauma are highly individual and will evolve over time. For asylum-seekers, any trajectory toward healing is likely to be interrupted by re-traumatizing events, such as court hearings and sessions with lawyers to prepare for them, which often require asylum-seekers to recount traumatic events in detail (Rosas 2019). Mental illness and distress are often residual markers of traumatic events experienced prior to and after migration, alongside post-migration stressors that characterize the lived experiences of asylum-seekers (Sangalang et al. 2019).

Vignette 8. Reliving Trauma.

Alexy asked me (Audrey) to join him for a consultation meeting with a lawyer, the third such effort to find a good and affordable representative for his asylum case. We sat next to each other facing the camera so that we could both be seen on the Zoom screen as Alexy shared his story. Thirty minutes into the meeting, which was in Russian (a language I don't speak), I felt a shift in the tone and demeanor of both Alexy and the lawyer. The lawyer moved his gaze to the papers on his desk as tears began streaming down Alexy's face. While I didn't understand what he was saying, I felt his deep pain. I handed Alexy a box of tissues and placed my hand on his shoulder as I cried alongside him. Soon, the moment passed, and the meeting concluded. I still don't know the details of his asylum case, but it really doesn't matter. What does matter is the profound gratitude I feel for his invitation to trust and to witness.

Asylum accompaniment relationships can also provoke feelings of psychological or emotional distress among people offering accompaniment. Hearing asylum-seekers' often-harrowing stories can result in secondary, or vicarious, trauma and feelings of distress (Lusk and Terrazas 2015; Roberts et al. 2021). We do not mean that secondary trauma causes suffering comparable to that experienced by many asylum-seekers, yet it is important for people offering accompaniment to be prepared for the distress they may feel, and to have a plan for caring for themselves. Feelings of distress are not entirely negative; they can be tied to profound experiences of trust and growth. It is an honor to earn

someone's trust such that they feel comfortable sharing a traumatic story with you, allowing you to witness. Daily engagement with asylum-seekers' lives also offers a profound and practical political education. It becomes impossible to intellectualize the impact of border regimes when a human being who has been impacted by them is sitting across from you at the breakfast table. As the accompaniment relationship evolves, the person offering accompaniment will be directly exposed to the systems and institutions that the asylum-seeker must navigate to survive, the barriers they face, the triumphs and humiliations they experience. In addition to secondary trauma, people engaging in accompaniment work can experience anger, frustration, hopelessness, and despair. It can also feel ethically confusing, at times, to dedicate energy and resources to one person or family, when so many others may also be suffering and in need of support.

Negotiating Boundaries. Good boundaries can serve both the accompanier and the accompanied. For those whose accompaniment commitment involves hosting in their homes, as Audrey has done twice, negotiating and setting clear boundaries is important. In both cases, chore sharing, quiet hours, guest visitation, and a host of other arrangements make our shared space a comfortable place for us both. Accompaniment also means negotiating boundaries around the material, logistical, and emotional support. For both of us, accompaniment has included countless hours on hold and filling out innumerable forms (in English) to support those we have accompanied in accessing health insurance, childcare and school enrollment, specialty medical appointments, apartment and job applications. This has given us a much more immediate and visceral sense of the barriers that asylum-seekers (and other marginalized and poor people) face daily when trying to access basic services than we otherwise would have as upper-middle-class, white US citizens — a part of our political education. At the same time, confronting the obstacles stacked against asylum-seekers sometimes feels demoralizing, exhausting and overwhelming. While it can be challenging, sometimes setting a boundary in the form of limiting assistance can serve both the accompanier, by preserving capacity and preventing burnout, and the accompanied, by empowering them to take on tasks

for themselves. Accompaniment relationships are human relationships, and this wisdom is often gleaned through trial and error.

Vignette 9. Siblings, Lawyers, and Money; or Confronting the Limits of Our Support.

Lety had another child and moved to where her partner had family; they later split up. Lety was scraping by as a single mother working in construction trades to support her 2- and 3-year-old children when her 17-year-old sister Karla made the arduous journey from Honduras to the United States. The Office of Refugee Resettlement released her into Lety's custody. *Las comadres* sprang into action, helping Lety enroll Karla in high school and searching for a pro bono lawyer. When we were unable to find one, we used personal funds and a contribution from Sarah's congregation to pay a lawyer \$5,000 to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) for Karla. Six months later, two more of Lety's teenage siblings, 15- and 16-year-old brothers, crossed the border and were released into her custody. She was now a 23-year-old single mother with five dependents. Each time I paid their legal fees or rent, my partner and I (Amanda) discussed the cumulative effect on our family's finances. He was sympathetic to Lety's situation and my commitment to her but had reservations about the costs. Eventually, I made the difficult decision not to fund legal representation for the boys, and to confine my direct assistance to Lety only. I sent her a little money for clothes for the boys, helped her enroll them in school, and encouraged her to ask her pro bono lawyer for advice on their cases.

Our connections with asylum-seekers through long-term accompaniment work make us highly invested in their wellbeing. When they are in crisis, we respond. This can include responding financially, to prevent eviction, the loss of a vehicle, or other emergencies. For me (Amanda), that financial response is not only my own; it is a joint decision I make with my partner, who has not always been comfortable with the amount that I want to give, a difference that requires both of us to clearly communicate and negotiate about our financial well-being, our values, and our boundaries. Whether or not hosts and sponsors should provide direct financial support to asylum-seekers is a matter of some debate. Some organizations recommend refraining from offering money directly (World Relief

2023); while this boundary appears simple on paper, following this advice can feel much more complicated in the face of real need.

Encountering Institutional Power. Asylum-seekers' lives are made invisible and constrained by American institutions. On one hand, as noted above, the lack of official attention to asylum-seeker transitions and integration marginalizes a population that has the same or greater need for services as those with refugee status. On the other, as deportable (De Genova 2002) people with tenuous legal status, asylum-seekers are highly vulnerable to intervention by police and immigration authorities, sometimes triggered by encounters with health, social service, and educational institutions. Asylum-seekers are also vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous people, businesses, and organized crime networks.

Vignette 10. Should I Talk to the Police?

After losing a low-wage factory job for failing to come to work during a blizzard, Lety got a job at a restaurant. A few weeks later, she mentioned that the restaurant manager planned to let Lety live in her house for free for a year, while she stayed with her daughter in another state. This raised red flags for me (Amanda) – could this be some kind of trap, linked to human trafficking? I urged caution, but Lety decided to break her lease (which I had co-signed) and move to the woman's house. She stopped responding to calls and texts and stopped sending her kindergartner to school. A home wellness check by the principal to an empty apartment resulted in a call to the police, who had already been contacted by Lety's ex as he searched for his children. A local police detective called me looking for Lety and I wrestled with what to do. I wanted to help find Lety and the children, but I also knew that police intervention in Lety's life might not be benign. What if she was hiding from her abusive ex? What if she didn't want to be found? After consulting with *las comadres*, I decided to tell the police everything I knew. A few days later, Lety told me she had simply lost her phone. She was OK, and her new living situation was safe, but she was stressed because her ex had taken her to court for custody of the children. She had not understood that taking her child out of school for several weeks without notice and not telling her ex where the children were could put her at legal risk.

Policy Recommendations: Support Networks and Bridging the Resource Gap

When I (Amanda) need support, I rely on my informal accompaniment team, four friends with varying degrees of experience with accompaniment. These friends invited me to consider accompanying Lety, so I have had their support from the beginning. We share an ongoing text thread and occasional group calls in which we seek advice and support from each other. Considering my own experience, social support is key to bolstering the health and sustainability of accompaniment relationships. On the other hand, I (Audrey) learned of the vital importance of an accompaniment team the hard way. In both of my accompaniment experiences, I navigated the bureaucracy alone, hard-pressed to seek out support. In the first instance, the COVID-19 pandemic was the primary obstacle. By the time of the second hosting experience, I had a more robust network on which to draw. For both of us, our networks of support have been informal outgrowths of our relationships with individuals and organizations engaged in asylum accompaniment, including each other.

Vignette 10, *Should I Talk to the Police?*, highlights the difficulty of supporting asylum-seekers remotely and the importance of local support networks. While Lety has four *comadres*, her move to the Midwest meant we were thousands of miles away. Had I (Amanda) been local, I could have accompanied her to check out the new living situation and accompanied her to family court. She could have stopped by my house to let me know that she had lost her phone. These things were impossible living states apart. Over the years, Lety's other *comadres* and I have attempted to connect her with local migrant-serving community organizations and supportive church congregations, but this has been challenging from a distance.

Our shared experiences suggest the vital importance of social support for asylum accompaniment, as well as the importance of widespread, interconnected, *local* asylum accompaniment networks. We recommend that migrant-supporting organizations invest in programs to connect people doing accompaniment work with each other for community building, mentorship, and peer support. Several national and local organizations — many of them faith-based

(United Church of Christ 2020; Unitarian Universalist Service Committee 2024), some of them focused on a specific community or identity such as LGBTQ asylum-seekers (North Bay Organizing Project n.d.; Episcopal Migration Ministries 2024) — have begun the work of building these networks. For national organizations like the Jesuit Refugee Service's Migrant Accompaniment Network, this work includes both building the resilience of local accompaniment teams and building connections between teams across the US (Jesuit Refugee Service USA 2024). Some faith-based groups accompany asylum-seekers collectively as a congregation, a model that could potentially be modified and adopted by secular groups. Accompaniment models should be supported, funded, evaluated, and replicated by organizations and funders who are invested in migrant and asylum-seeker well-being and integration.

We also recommend that state and federal agencies institute policy changes to bridge the deep gap between refugee and asylum support. At the state level, initiatives to offer driver's licenses and state identification cards, health insurance coverage, and unemployment benefits to undocumented people help to bridge the gap (Jimenez Romero 2024), as do laws allowing undocumented people to claim the earned income tax credit (National Immigration Law Center (NILC 2023a). Some states protect asylum-seekers and undocumented people by limiting local police's ability to share information and coordinate with immigration enforcement (Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network 2019). Right now, the availability of a variety of services to asylum-seekers is a confusing patchwork, dependent on individual state laws (NILC 2023b). Advocates can push for these laws to be implemented in states where they have none, as well as press for broader access to social services for asylum-seekers at the federal level. The federal government could also invest in supporting accompaniment networks for asylum-seekers, as it supports accompaniment for refugees. The Welcome Corps (2024) program, which requires groups of at least five people for sponsorship of a refugee, provides tools, resources, and access to resettlement experts.

The Asylum Accompaniment Alphabet

As we engaged in critical reflection on our asylum accompaniment experiences, we felt drawn to create something that could be of service to others considering on embarking on an accompaniment relationship. Boylorn and Orbe (2022) note that in addition to understanding people's lived experiences in the context of "social conditions [. . .] and oppressive power arrangements," critical methods call on us to "fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination" (p. 8–9). Offering practical guidance, which could be shared in the context of a training, workshop, or peer mentor relationship, is one way we have chosen to "fuse theory and action" to challenge domination in our contexts. *The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment* (see Appendix) offers advice for navigating the complex bureaucracy of government, private, and non-profit services and support, as well as practical suggestions for enhancing a sense of belonging in the asylum-seeker's new community. Many of the letters of the ABCs (A, B, D, F, G, H, I, J, R, S, T, U, and W) offer insights and suggestions for engaging with migrant-serving organizations. For example, asylum-seekers represented by a lawyer (A) are five times more likely to be granted asylum (TRAC 2017) yet pro bono or paid legal representation is difficult to secure. Economic stability, a key determinant of health and wellbeing, is built on access to work, banking, and housing. Yet to open a bank account (B), one must be able to prove one's identity with multiple original documents (D, I, U, and W) and have the financial capacity to make a minimum deposit. A job (J) can offer dignity, purpose, and a means of support, but most asylum-seekers must wait 150 days after submitting their asylum claim to begin the work permit process (W), which takes months to complete. The draw to work informally is strong, but it may disqualify some from obtaining lawful permanent residence status. Some states offer access to social services such as food and housing assistance (F and O), health care access (H), and transit passes (T). All states are required to provide K-12 schooling to children of asylum-seekers (S) and most offer free or

low-cost educational opportunities (E, L, S) to learn English, build skills, pursue recertification in former professions, or obtain new credentials (the US does not recognize certifications from other countries for skilled professionals). Finally, it is essential to monitor and respond to US government notices (G), which range from ICE check ins to biometrics collection appointments to court hearings.

Vignette 11. Persistence Pays Off.

Shortly after getting settled into my home, Alexy and I (Audrey) spent many frustrating hours researching the work permit process. We learned that he would have to wait six months after submitting his asylum claim, so we looked at options for volunteering and schooling during the wait. A few weeks later, I found a link to an immigration lawyer advisory bulletin stating that asylum-seekers with c(11) status under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) 212(d)(5) could immediately file for a work permit. We had no idea what that meant, but we were excited to find “INA 212(d)(5)” hand-written on Alexy’s I-94, a form he received at the border. This feeling turned to frustration due to blanks on the I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, that he didn’t know how to complete, including his “eligibility category” and “current immigration status or category.” By accident, we discovered the status code “DT” when he logged into USCIS to view the electronic version of the Form I-94. We later connected “DT” with the category c(11), which we learned means parole.⁴ Our persistence paid off: he received his work permit four months later.

A sense of belonging is vitally important, as successful integration takes a community. Community can be built through connections to migrant-led organizations, community centers, resource hubs, houses of worship, libraries, schools, and volunteer

opportunities (C, E, J, L, M, N, Q, and S). Grocery stores (M) that cater to certain identities offer belonging through food and culture. These ties promote inclusion connection, particularly for those with minoritized identities who are often targets of discrimination, racism, and xenophobia (Q and X). Nowhere is this sense of belonging more important than at home. When sharing space, belonging takes on an added level of meaning. At a basic level, your similarities outweigh your differences (K). You both want to live a fulfilling and dignified life, and this shared purpose can shape how you interact. Where there are differences in culinary and cultural practices (M), make it a point to share meals and traditions with each other. While you may share many values (V), it is important to respect each other’s agency, privacy, preferences, and humanity. Unfamiliarity with local laws, policies, customs, and practices doesn’t mean one should be infantilized because adult asylum-seekers are just that, adults. Start the relationship as you would with a new friend. This means valuing and respecting each other’s boundaries (N). Creating a space in the home (O) that, when possible, includes a door one can close, offers the possibility of sanctuary, respite, and calm when the constant barrage of transition creates wear and tear on the psyche. This is especially important when the journey has been characterized by distress and trauma. When an asylum-seeker transitions to their own space, a sense of home can be fostered through the caring accompaniment. Friends and family may be able to donate furniture and secondhand stores and online apps (O) can be a useful source of free or affordable, gently-used household items.

For people considering it for the first time, accompanying an asylum-seeking individual or family may seem overwhelming. We hope *The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment* provides useful guidance for those embarking on this transformative journey.

Conclusion

Asylum-seekers often face a years-long wait for their protection claims to be decided in a country

⁴ Humanitarian Parole is granted to a foreign national (who is otherwise inadmissible) to temporarily enter the United States due to an emergency and urgent humanitarian reason or significant public benefit. See https://helpspanish.cbp.gov/s/article/Article-1639?language=en_US.

that largely discounts their needs prior to a judge's decision. While they wait, they live precariously in social, political, and legal contexts that marginalize and often further traumatize them. Asylum accompaniment, as a form of practical, embodied solidarity, exists on a continuum from relatively apolitical humanitarianism through advocacy to robust contention with the dominant power structures of the US immigration enforcement system. Accompaniment can be rewarding, but the journey is not without its obstacles, heartbreak, and challenges.

Through the process of critical autoethnography, we explored, analyzed, and contextualized our personal narratives of asylum accompaniment, examining our positionality and responsibility, and situating our experiences in the context of ongoing attacks on asylum in the American political system.

Reflecting on our experiences, we believe that community-building, mentorship, and peer support are key to the resilience and effectiveness of accompaniment relationships and support the growth and development of asylum accompaniment networks. *The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment*, a practical guide for those choosing to engage in asylum accompaniment, grew out of this reflective analytical process.

We encourage others to engage with the challenging yet rewarding praxis of asylum accompaniment as a form of embodied solidarity, the reflection of a moral commitment to challenging the harmful erasure of asylum-seekers as a community worthy of welcome and support. We also call on advocates, migrant-serving organizations and federal, state, and local agencies to step up to bridge the deep gap between refugee and asylum-seeker support.

Appendix. The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment.

The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment

When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity. . . . – Peter Hans Kolvenbach, SJ

A	Advocate/lawyer and Asylum claim	B	Bank account and debit/credit cards	C	Community and family connections	D	Driver's license
	Asylum is a complex process.		Promotes independence and financial sustainability.		We all need "our people" and "it takes a village" to feel connected.		Supports mobility in locales with few public transport options.
	• Asylum is five times more likely to be granted with a lawyer.		• Starts a credit history.		• Connect with local migrant-led organizations		• Must pass a knowledge test, get a learner's permit, and complete a skills test.
	• AILA has a lawyer search feature; many law schools and some NGOs provide pro bono support; see this Florence Project resource.		• Pay attention to fees, credit limits, and balances.		• Connect with local church, library, school, community center, or Meet-Up groups.		• Arrange insurance and practice to learn unfamiliar rules.
	• Case information can be found via EOIR and Respondent Access Portal.		• Can temporarily borrow home country identification documents from ICE.		• Invite/ask/accept help: many hands make light work!		• Most states have study guides in a variety of languages.
	• Judge reports are on TRAC.		• Explore affordable ways to send home remittances, for example, Remitly, WorldRemit, etc.		• Engage each other's family, friends, and colleagues in the accompaniment journey.		• Access and required documentation vary by state.
	• Appeal reports are on PACER.				• Connect with home country family and friends.		
E	ELL classes	F	Food and cash assistance	G	US Government notices	H	Health care
	English promotes inclusion and can support upward mobility.		Social services can bridge support gaps.		Stay on top of developments.		Access to treatment for acute and chronic conditions is paramount.
	• English Language Learning classes are free/ cheap through community colleges, libraries, and local NGOs.		• Federal and state benefits differ by legal status and locale.		• Set up an account with USCIS.		• Arrange for immediate and long-term medical, dental, mental health care services.
	• Make good use of friends, Tarjimy, Google Translate, etc. until ELL underway!		• Families ineligible for SNAP may be eligible for WIC.		• Register phone, mail changes.		• Most states have programs for immigrants or the uninsured.
	• A good focus while waiting for the work permit.		• Many more services beyond food and cash assistance may be available.		• Track immigration court dates and ICE check-ins, if applicable.		• Look for clinics that serve low SES folk if health insurance is inaccessible.
			• Food banks can fill food security needs.		• Some folk may be eligible for Temporary Protected Status.		• Wellness leads to resilience!
I	Identification card	J					Job
	Promotes sense of agency, identity, and belonging.						Offers dignity, purpose, and a means of support.
	• May be available in some states; may not suffice for air travel.						• Strong desire for income is challenged by long work permit timeline.
	• May need to temporarily borrow home country identification documents retained by ICE.						• Careful about informal work before the work permit is issued.
							• Volunteering can be a job and makes a civic contribution as well!
K	Kindred spirits						
	On a basic level, you're not that different from each other. Be mindful of two possible differences and one enduring similarity: Possible differences: Only one of you may have experienced forced displacement and there is expertise in that experience; stay humble and learn from each other. Enduring similarity: You both want to live a fulfilling and dignified life. You may find yourselves at the start of a beautiful friendship!						
L	Library	M	Meet each other's cuisines and cultures	N	Negotiation and boundaries	O	Own room or place
	Libraries are gems!		Promotes inclusion and belonging.		Clear communication and boundaries foster trust.		We all need a place to call home.
	• A library card is the gateway to books, computers, printers, and programs/ workshops, etc.		• Find cultural/ national/ ethnic centers and grocery stores.		• Value each other's boundaries: they are necessary and important.		• Carve out a dignified space for all if you're living together.
	• ELL conversation groups, resume and cover letter prep, job searches, etc.		• Make meals for each other.		• Maintain an open channel of communication with family members on values and boundaries around time, energy, and finances.		• Low SES housing programs may be an option, if qualified.
	• A place to educate yourself on the state of migration today.		• Support and respect each other's holidays, traditions, and religious preferences.				• Used goods are affordable and sustainable; Check out second-hand stores, Craigslist, Buy Nothing, and other platforms.

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

The ABCs of Asylum Accompaniment

When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity. . . . — Peter Hans Kolvenbach, SJ

	Peer support	Q	Queer organizations and resources	R	Refugee/immigrant organizations	S	School enrollment and daycare/aftercare
	- Connect with others who are doing accompaniment work. - Share your experiences with like-minded peers and mentors who understand accompaniment and can support you.	Promotes identity and inclusion. - Connect with local LBG+ organizations and resources if these identities are salient. - Support and respect each other's non-dominant identities.		NGOs have long experience navigating the bureaucracy. - Provides case management, resource navigation, housing and legal referrals, etc. - Examples: Catholic Charities, World Relief, International Rescue Committee, etc. - Join the Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project.		Education promotes belonging and can support upward mobility. - Lots of paperwork required for Pre-K and K-12 enrollment. - Explore day/aftercare options. - College (community/ vocational/ university) for re-certification or new credentials for adults.	
T	Transportation						
	Supports mobility and access to jobs, services, etc. - May qualify for donated air travel through Miles4Migrants. - Cards, passes, or apps for bus, train, bike, scooter, rideshare, etc. - Low SES transit programs may be an option, if qualified. - Ride along. . . get lost on purpose to build skills! - Explore how to get kids to/from school.						
V	Values						
	- Value each other's agency, dignity, privacy, preferences, and humanity. - On respecting each other's privacy: ask how to introduce to others; ask before posting photos or information on social media.						
W	Work permit						
	Essential for economic self-sustainment within the law. - Expect long waiting periods; some statuses may have fees. - I-765 submitted and tracked through USCIS website.						
Y	Yes!						
	Say Yes to letting the experience transform you both.						Zero!
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Values

Xenophobia and Racism

We say we are a nation of immigrants, but some don't walk the talk.

- It's a thing and it's everywhere!
- These experiences are an opportunity to transgress and transform.

Zero!

- Zero. . . the number of times you'll regret accompanying each other.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge Joanna, Alexy, Lety, Laura Coleman, Erica de Klerk, Bernie Eguia, Mary Gibbons, Harrison Hanvey, Ashley Klick, Lois Lorentzen, Nick Mele, Mark Petterson, Sarah Riggio, Tina Schlabach, Ashley Edgette, Carmen Smith-Estrada, Maria Torres, and Heath Spencer.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Amanda Heffernan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5100-2581>

Audrey Hudgins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6855-7110>

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